

## Testimony to the Little Hoover Commission on Immigration and Communities

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### PolicyLink

From East LA to Storm Lake City, Iowa, immigrants are transforming American communities. Immigrants are now in every corner of the nation. In California, all counties experienced an increase in their immigrant population in the last 20 years. As of 2000, one of every 4 Californians was foreign-born.

Immigrants are bringing new traditions, resources and languages to communities. They are rebuilding deteriorated neighborhoods in central cities and are creating new industries in American cities. Their entrepreneurship can be seen in every city of the nation. Ethnic restaurants and shops can be found in most cities of the country and all large cities have strong ethnic enclaves. But they bring both opportunities and challenges to communities. How cities and communities transform themselves, so as to accommodate<sup>1</sup> these new populations and their children is the challenge for the future.

In a forthcoming report, tentatively entitled “*Immigration into America’s Communities: How are Communities Accommodating their Newest Arrivals?*” PolicyLink is examining how immigrants transform communities and how communities are responding to immigration so as to create better communities for all. Below we discuss 4 important issues facing communities: Language and Culture, Capacity Building, Education, and Collaboration. However, other issues are also important. Not all communities are exposed to the same set of problems. Every community will have a

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<sup>1</sup> We define accommodation as the process by which established residents and groups at different stages of resettlements found ways to adjust and support one another.

different experience, one that is unique to its own situation. Nonetheless, this report provides a framework of the most important issues facing communities.

Language is a key to advancement and involvement in American society. Knowing English enhances immigrants' opportunities and helps them communicate with others. But language is also an expression of one's culture and many immigrants, while understanding the importance of learning English, retain their first language so as to express their cultural uniqueness. Language is also a major source of tension between newcomers and established residents, as people are unable to communicate with one another. At the same time, language limits immigrants' understanding of their rights and their access to resources.

Although federal laws and court decisions require the provision of education and language services, in many cases the laws are not enforced and immigrants' rights are not respected. Even though English is so crucial for communication and advancement, English classes are underprovided. Where available they generally have waiting lists, or are not easily accessible. Providing opportunities and resources for immigrants to learn English is necessary for newcomers' advancement in US society. But also hiring interpreters and translators, as well as translating forms and materials for immigrants, is essential to adequately serve the immigrant population.

But in addition to language, cultural gaps affect policy implementation. Barriers to communication and cultural misunderstanding lead to polarization and isolation. New traditions and values are not easily accommodated. For instance, traditional healing practices are often misunderstood and ideas about childrearing held by immigrant groups have created problems with the police and child authorities. Providing information to

immigrants about alternative approaches, in addition to training authorities on cultural issues, would address some of these concerns.

Another crucial part of creating strong multi-cultural communities is to build the institutional capacity within communities to represent the interest of newcomers and established residents. In many communities there is no infrastructure to deal with the needs of the new immigrant population. In some cases, there are no immigrant institutions and the existing institutions do not know how to address the needs of the new population. Others find themselves having to divert their limited resources to serve the new community. There is an overwhelming need to create new institutions and build leadership. As expressed by Leonie Hermantin of the Haitian American Foundation in Miami, "It is important for the power structure to encourage, nurture, and develop the leadership within the new population. They cannot afford to just ignore them, otherwise people will feel disenfranchised and this would lead to racial conflicts."

Building strong communities also requires the support and involvement of local residents and the building of strong ties with other community organization and with government. Partnerships among nonprofits are crucial to success, as is engaging the immigrant population by encouraging naturalization and participation.

In addition to responding to language and cultural needs and helping create capacity within communities, it is also important for the state to provide immigrants with information. There is a lack of awareness by the immigrant community on how to access the system and their rights. In some cases people fear that they will be discriminated against, deported, or not granted permanent status if they use resources. Referral information is generally not available. Immigrants do not know what they qualify for or

where to access services. In addition to family support, health and educational services, many immigrants are not aware of their civil rights. Many of them do not report crimes to the police and are exploited by employers.

Lastly, the key to good relations in multi-cultural communities is to find opportunities for collaboration. Groups of different ethnicities or cultures can work together towards common goals. Some of these common goals could be organizing Neighborhood Watch programs, improving schools or developing recreation areas. These activities improve communication among groups and overcome mistrust. State and policymakers are in the position to bring people together to solve problems, either by providing a leadership, organizing meetings, training future leaders, or facilitating cooperation.

With the help of the state, a new leadership has to emerge in order to respond to these issues and to create strong multi-ethnic communities. While there has been such tremendous growth and dispersion of the immigrant population, in many communities, they are either ignored or they are viewed as competing with natives, and are therefore not incorporated into the process by which communities confront problems and challenges. This has created a separation between immigrants and existing residents, who live side by side with limited interaction. This in turn has hurt communities and has led to underdevelopment, racial tensions, and fragmentation.

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About PolicyLink: PolicyLink is a national nonprofit research, communications, capacity building and advocacy organization, dedicated to advancing policies to achieve economic and social equity based on the wisdom, voice and experience of local constituencies.